



**From bestselling and award-winning author Tracy Tappan  
THE BLOODLINE WAR (Book 1 in the Community Series)**



## Chapter One

The house loomed out of the darkness like a hulking beast, its windows black eyes, the front door left gaping wide in a permanent scream. Yellow *Crime Scene Do Not Cross* tape was strung around the perimeter, announcing to the world that bad stuff had happened here, just in case anybody had missed the stink of burned flesh and the eerie silence hanging over everything. Only the occasional crackling dispatcher call from one of the police cruisers parked out front broke the stillness.

A shiver crawled up Toni Parthen's spine, and she had the embarrassing urge to turn around and run. She *really* didn't care for creepy stuff. She dutifully headed for the house anyway, cutting through the red and blue police lights flashing rhythmically across the brick walkway. A uniformed officer was posted at the front door.

She lifted the ID badge hanging around her neck and showed it to him. “I’m your blood expert out of Scripps Memorial. Dr. Toni Parthen.” A *real* doctor of hematology, not a mere intern, but still a lowly Fellow. Which meant that when the San Diego Police Department needed a blood specialist, she was the one who got yanked away in the middle of watching *How To Lose A Guy In 10 Days* to whatever gory scene needed her scientific expertise.

The officer glanced at her badge, then down at the medical bag she was carrying, and then inevitably—she nearly sighed—his eyes landed on her boobs. The Girls were bundled up in a winter coat, nice and tight against the cold January weather, but they were of a size that defied concealment.

She cleared her throat, quashing the urge to quip, *Eyes up here, pal*.

“Uh...yeah, go on in.” To his credit, the officer blushed a little. “They’re waiting for you upstairs.”

She entered the house, passing through a dimly lit foyer and a deserted, well-kept living room. The stink of burned flesh was stronger in here, like a cannibal barbecue gone terribly wrong, and her esophagus tightened. God, but she hated forensics. She arrived at the bottom of a flight of stairs and stopped. Waiting for her at the top was a man with a badge on his belt and a gun in a shoulder holster.

She exhaled sharply. “Crap, not *you*.” The night just got worse.

Detective John Waterson arched a single brow at her, one corner of his mouth climbing upward. “I’m going to stand here and pretend I’m *not* insulted by that, if it’s all the same to you.”

Toni rolled her eyes. “No offense intended, Detective, but your cases stink.” Waterson and his partner, Pablo Ramirez, were on the Occult Crimes Unit, and their crime scenes always ran high on creepiness. Too high.

Waterson's smile widened, the curve of his mouth masculine and sexy, his amazing blue-green eyes warming with amusement.

Trumpets went off in her head. And here was the real reason she didn't like working with this man: John Waterson was hot.

Dressed in cowboy boots, blue jeans, and a dark brown long-sleeved shirt that was folded up at the cuffs to reveal strong forearms, he had the tall, athletically lean build of a swimmer or a tennis player. He had...yes, a very nice mouth, despite the fact that an unlit cigarette was dangling from his lips. He was handsome, self-assured, probably in his early 30's, like her, and in possession of that most alluring of all qualities: intelligence. She was drawn to John in a way she'd never been with any other man. But herein lay the trouble: John was, in point of fact, a *man*, and she'd given up on interacting with their gender—other than professionally—a long time ago.

Sighing, she trudged up the stairs. Nothing else for it. She was here on business. A low rumble of voices was coming from somewhere, a softly crying voice. *Wonderful*. “All right, what am I in for?”

Waterson's eyes danced. “Feeling a bit squeamish again, are we?”

Heat rose into her cheeks. She wasn't squeamish about most things—she was a doctor, for Pete's sake—but she hated the aforementioned creepy stuff. No doubt the result of her older brother dragging her to too many horror films when she was a kid. She narrowed her eyes on Waterson. “Last case we worked on, Detective, some cult freaks had stripped *all of the skin* off the corpse's body.”

He held up a hand. “It's nothing like that this time, I swear.” Fishing a pack of matches out of his breast pocket, he went on to explain, “A couple of bad guys climbed in through the

bedroom window of the fifteen-year-old daughter and tried to snag her.” He opened the pack and tugged out a match. “Her father heard her screams, rampaged in with a shotgun, and filled one of the perps with a load of buckshot.”

She groaned softly. “Lovely.”

“Don’t worry.” He struck the match and held the flame to the tip of his cigarette. “The scene is surprisingly *unbloody*. That’s why you’re here.”

She plucked the cigarette out of his mouth and mashed it into a plant. “You do know that you’re the only person left in California who smokes, don’t you?” She headed down the hall and entered a room that was clearly a girl’s, and a girl who for once hadn’t gone the way of the Goth: lacy lampshades, white eyelet bedspread, posters of Taylor Swift, Taylor Lautner, and, *ah*, second place to Matthew McConaughey: Brad Pitt. Against the backdrop of all this innocence, the black-clad body sprawled out under the window was a grotesque stain.

Two other men were in the room. Pablo Ramirez, a Padres baseball cap perched backward on his head, and a skinny kid—okay, an adult, but one who looked fresh out of science camp for a day of dress-up in his daddy’s navy blue suit.

Waterson gestured to him. “This is Silas Thornton, CSI.”

She nodded to the CI and moved over to the corpse, stopping at its feet to—

What the hell? She’d never seen anything like this. The guy was a wreck, half a dozen bullet-sized craters in his chest, a few more peppering his thighs, and yet...there wasn’t a single drop of blood on him—not anywhere, for that matter. Odder still, the front of the guy’s black shirt was completely eaten away, the fabric of his pants nearly in the same condition, and there were holes dotting the carpet beneath him, as if something acidic had dripped off of him and onto it. Jesus, this wasn’t just an *unbloody* scene, it was impossibly *bloodless*.

She looked at Waterson. “The body was drained?” For what sick purpose, she didn’t want to know. Cult freaks were such psychos.

“Evidence suggests it wasn’t.”

She arched her brows at him in a *what now?* expression.

Waterson gestured, a hint of wryness slanting his mouth. “You want to take a look?”

“At what? You are aware that I deal in actual, physical blood, right, Detective? The kind of stuff that can be viewed under a microscope and put in a centrifuge?”

Another smile tried to make it onto Waterson’s mouth. “Just give it your best guess, Doc.”

Sighing, she marched over to the body and crouched down. The dead guy was young, maybe only nineteen or twenty, his features smooth and adolescent despite a stern chin and cruel-looking lips. He had a tattoo on his face, black flames crawling up his left jaw like rotten ivy. Biting back an *ugh*, she opened her medical bag and snapped on a pair of latex gloves, then dug out a scalpel. She grabbed the body’s wrist.

“Watch out,” Waterson warned.

She glanced up.

Waterson nodded at the corpse’s hand. “The ring on the perp’s finger will give you one helluva shock if you touch it.”

“You’re kidding.” Who in the world booby-trapped a ring? She turned the corpse’s wrist to get a better view of it, catching the sparkle of a strange red crystal in the center. Shimmering and undulating, the thing looked like it was filled with some sort of boiling liquid—or as if it lived and breathed. God. This night was reaching new levels of creepy.

Steering clear of the ring, she carefully cut into the corpse's wrist. The vein was empty, not even a trace of blood in it. *Absolutely nothing*. She sat back on her heels and slowly peeled off her gloves. Weirder and weirder. "I can't think of anything that would leave a vein totally stripped. Maybe some chemical...? But I really don't know. You need to get the body on a table and have an ME do a thorough autopsy plus a full chem panel."

The CSI pounced on that. "That's exactly what I said."

She looked at Silas. "Did you?" She shifted her eyes over to Waterson.

Waterson met her gaze without expression.

A flush of heat rolled up the back of her neck. "I see." She threw her scalpel and gloves into her medical bag and snapped it closed. "I'm sorry I couldn't have been more help." She came stiffly to her feet. "Good luck with the case." She spun on her heel and headed through the door, her strides clipped. *Of all the unbelievable—*

"Toni!" Halfway down the stairs, Waterson caught up with her. "Wait—" He took hold of her elbow.

She twisted her arm out of his hold, her pulse kicking up a notch. "Don't touch me, John."

Waterson stepped back, both hands raised, palms out.

"Tonight's call was bogus," she accused, her voice sharp with anger. "This case couldn't be analyzed onsite and you *knew* that."

"All right, you got me." He dropped his hands. "I called you here somewhat unnecessarily. But how else am I going to get to see you? You won't go out with me."

"So stop asking!" she flashed.

Exhaling a long breath, John glanced away. He took a moment, then shook his head and looked back at her. The color of his eyes deepened. “I can’t,” he said softly.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, drawing a breath to calm herself. “Look, John, just...please just try to understand this has nothing to do with you personally. Okay? I’ve just had a long string of bad dates, lately.”

A really long string, starting all the way back in high school with Brad Flannigan, the super-popular jock star who’d asked her to Homecoming Dance when the head cheerleader had come down with the flu. That night, he’d convinced Toni to give him her virginity, only to broadcast that fact all over school by first period bell come Monday.

Since then it’d been one after another of men who’d start out dating her for her bra size and then get scared off by her IQ size. Or who’d date her for her face, expecting her to be as “perfect” on the inside as they thought she was on the outside, then discover that she most definitely was *not*, and, God, she was so sick of being a disappointment.

The miserable dating run had thankfully come to an end last year when Robert what’s-his-name, an anesthesiologist, had loudly announced in front of a movie theatre full of people that she had about as much feeling as a “Dr. House with tits.” And after all the faking in bed she’d done for him, too.

Waterson’s voice lowered. “I’m not like the rest of the men you’ve dated, Toni, I can guarantee it. I work on the Occult Crimes Unit, and I wouldn’t do that if I liked normal. So, you know, you can be weird, and it’s fine.”

A spasm of laughter unhinged inside her chest. “That’s a relief.” He was probably an all-around nice guy and a great kisser, too. But if she did something stupid like go out on a date with this man, she might then do something even stupider, like crack open the door to her heart. And

once again she'd just end up facing down the vast and consuming loneliness which always got worse whenever she was—paradoxically enough—with a man.

Thank God the meat wagon boys started up the stairs just then.

She and John stepped apart to allow the two men hauling a stretcher to pass. “I appreciate the offer, Detective. But I’m afraid the answer’s still no.”

She left the house, crossing the street at a near run. She fumbled in her purse for her keys, making a noise in her throat, then unlocked her car door with a sharp twist of her wrist. She jerked hard on the handle, throwing her purse and medical bag onto the—

“*One* date,” he said behind her.

She froze, her breath catching in her throat.

“That’s all I’m asking for,” he went on quietly, “then I’ll leave you alone forever, I swear. Is that really so unreasonable?”

She closed her eyes, the logical part of her mind saying, “No, it’s not unreasonable.” What was one night out of her life in the larger scheme of things? Except that it was painful as hell to keep discovering, over and over, that she had some uncanny knack for repelling men.

He moved closer, apparently interpreting her pause as acquiescence. A masculine hand appeared on top of her door, another one bracing itself on the roof of her car. The warmth of his male body stole up right behind her. She inhaled a slow, even breath, recognizing his scent at once, that metallic hint of handcuffs and handgun, tobacco, of course, and just a trace of Drakkar Noir cologne. Heat snaked through her limbs, a surprising jolt of yearning landing in her belly.

“I’m thinking The Fish Market restaurant would be a great place to go.” His breath caressed the back of her neck, sending a shudder down her spine. “Toni—” His hand dropped to



the curve of her waist and he turned her around. “Please don’t keep us dancing around this thing that’s been between us for months.”

He dipped his head, and her heart skipped a beat when a lock of hair fell across his brow. He hesitated, no doubt waiting for her to do her usual and reject him, but... His tempting lips were so close to hers, his body warm and smelling so damned masculine that her *nucleus accumbens*—the pleasure center of her brain—just took over and started making decisions. Her chin lifted on its own, offering him her lips.

No more dilly-dallying now. John settled his mouth on hers. She exhaled a small sigh through her nose. His lips were soft and warm and moist, and he tasted surprisingly good, just the slightest suggestion of tobacco covered up by a flavor that was all man. The kiss was light, no more than gentle and reassuring...until she linked her arms around his neck and pressed her breasts against his chest.

A rough groan rushed out of him, and he instantly deepened the kiss, angling his head to the side and opening his mouth over hers. His arms pulled her so close she could feel his heart thundering against her breasts. Her own heart surged into a faster beat. God, he felt wonderful. Everything a man should be, strong and solid, all the things that could make a woman want. With a breathy moan of her own, she slipped her tongue into his mouth and felt his shoulders stiffen. He met her tongue hungrily with the wet heat of his own, and while their tongues dueled, her stomach did a funny gyration. She waited for that little something more...and then there it was: a nice, slow-burning quickening, down low.

She pulled her lips away from his with a gasp, nudging him back a step before her *nucleus accumbens* could really take over and make her plop down right there on the asphalt and to hell with the show she and John would give Officer Bug-Eyes over by the front door.

John stood staring at her through the shadows, his eyes glittering hotly in the silver moonlight, his lungs working in short pants.

“Well, that was convincing,” she breathed out, her own chest laboring. She turned toward her purse on the driver’s seat of her car and pulled out a business card. She was a fool to give him her number, knowing full well that she was setting herself up for heartbreak again. But damn it, she was also a woman who hadn’t had a man’s hands on her in over a year, and that kiss had been a doozy. “This is my work number”—she held it out to him—“but it connects to a message system that texts my personal cell phone.”

He moved to take it, looking slightly stunned.

She quickly angled it out of his reach. “*Which* Fish Market? Del Mar or Harbor Island?”

He blinked once, at half speed, then his lips spread into a slow smile. “Harbor Island, of course, with that view of the Coronado Bay, the Beach Boys hopefully playing in the background, and us cracking crab legs.” His eyes sparkled mischievously. “I happen to think you’d look dynamite in a large plastic bib.”

“Right.” She snorted and rolled her eyes. “If that’s the *only* thing I was wearing.”

“Ho!” John clutched his chest and stumbled backward as if he’d been shot.

She laughed. *Oops. Wrong imagery, there.* She handed him the card, still laughing. He really was irresistible.

He tucked it into his breast pocket next to his cigarettes, his eyes remaining steady on hers, his mouth still too dangerously inviting.

She quickly hopped into her car and buckled up. He closed the door for her, and she unrolled the window. “I only ask that you don’t smoke around me, okay?”

He nodded once. “Fair enough.” He leaned through the window and snatched a quick kiss. “Get home safe, Doc.”

She met his eyes with a warm smile. “I will.”

He slapped the roof of her car.

She pulled away, watching in her rearview mirror as he headed over to a blue Chevy and jumped inside next to Pablo. She caught her own reflection and saw that she was grinning like an idiot. She was an idiot. An all too familiar twist of panic shot through her belly, and she shut down her smile. She needed to be prepared going into this thing for it not to work out... For her to like him more and more, and then for him to eventually leave because that’s—

Her cell beeped the arrival of a text message. Frowning, she tugged her iPhone out of her purse and glanced at the screen.

*So how desperate is it that I’m already messaging you? I’m really looking forward to our dinner... :o) J.*

Pleasure entered her chest. Okay, maybe this was going to be—

A horn blared a warning. She jerked her eyes up. *Oh, my God!* The headlights of another car were swerving toward her. With a gasp, she yanked her steering wheel hard to the right, her cell phone jettisoning from her grip. Her car shrieked into a sideways skid, tires smoking and screeching, and—

The cars collided.

She cried out as her body lurched forward violently. The exploding airbag punched her back in the seat and sent her head snapping against the headrest. A searing pain tore through the backs of her eyeballs. Glass tinkled, steam hissed, and...

There was only blackness.

## Message from Tracy Tappan



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